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Reference collection development in the occult

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REFERENCE COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT IN THE OCCULT

The occult will be defined as covering all areas apart from conventional religious beliefs that are beyond the scope of plain understanding and are mysterious, supernormal, or supernatural. This is a broad and imprecise definition. Like pornography, the occult is very difficult to define, but you tend to know it when you see it.

Should a university library collect material on the occult? A public library has to respond to its patrons' reading interests, so it is easy to justify developing an occult collection there. Most universities, in these times of limited budgets, find that they have to confine their purchases to subjects taught in courses offered by the university or to works supporting faculty research. Rarely is there a course taught on the occult, so why collect it?

Two major issues need to be addressed. First, what should be done about a reference collection in the occult at a college or university library? Second, what should be done about collection development in such occult subjects as witchcraft, satanism, reincarnation, immortality, neardeath experiences, and cryptozoology, which have aspects covered in such traditional courses as religion, psychology, history, and biology?

With the minimalist approach that university and college budgets require in this area, what would be the best books for a reference and core subject collection on the occult? Could public libraries also manage with these items, or need they expand upon them?

Some Definitions

Cryptozoology: the search for animals presently

unknown to science except by rumor (e.g.,

the Loch Ness monster). Fortean phenomena: phenomena found in the

natural world for which conventional science

has no adequate explanation (e.g., rains of

frogs and fish). Poltergeist: a mischievous spirit that throws

objects such as dishes around a house,

smashing them, and making much noise. First, with regard to the reference collection, there are a number of simple choices because so little exists on the subject from a reference standpoint.

All collections need Leslie A. Shepard's *The Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (2d ed., 1984), even though it contains many errors, especially in its dates. In fact, the book looks as if it missed being copy-edited in any but the most cursory way. There are missing dates in one part that are present in another. No one seems to have tried to fill in the missing information. Yet there is nothing better at present.

Also essential are the two one-volume encyclopedias upon which Shepard based his three-volume work. They are Nandor Fodor's *Encyclopedia of Psychic Science* (1935) and Lewis Spence's *Encyclopedia of Occultism* (1920).

George Eberhart is a one-man bibliographic army in his output in this area. All of his bibliographies on the occult belong in university

reference collections. They are *Monsters* (1983), *Geobibliography of Anomalies* (1980), and *UFOs and the Extraterrestrial Contact Movement* (1986).

Thomas Claire's two occult bibliographies are useful: *Occult Bibliography: An Annotated List of Books Published in English, 1971 through 1975* (1978) and *Occult/Paranormal Bibliography: An Annotated List of Books Published in English, 1976 through 1981* (1984). The time limitations of these volumes greatly restrict their utility, however. It should also be kept in mind that Claire's annotations as to the usefulness of the books are highly personal and, as such, may be of limited value to others.

Cosette Kies' *The Occult in the Western World* (1986) is also worth having, in spite of a bit of confusion on the author's part as to what constitutes the occult and how it should be subdivided. Her way makes little sense to me (and perhaps to others).

In the field of witchcraft, there are two essential one-volume encyclopedias. These are Rossell Hope Robbins' *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (1959) and Rosemary E. Guiley's *Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* (1989). Robbins' book is a fine scholarly treatment of the historical aspects of witchcraft, ending in about 1850. While Guiley's book covers this period as well (although in a less thorough fashion), it also has extensive coverage of modern witches and organizations of the last one hundred years. The two books need to be used together to provide full coverage. Other materials on witchcraft that might be considered essential in reference include Henry C. Lea's *Materials Towards a History of Witchcraft* (1939) and J. Gordon Melton's *Magic, Witchcraft and Paganism in America: A Bibliography* (1982). Often the Lea book is not placed in the reference collection, but perhaps it should be. In its Appendix Ia, the Melton book contains a reprint of George F. Black's *List of Works in the New York Public Library Relating to Witchcraft in the United States*. This originally appeared in the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* for November 1908. A companion piece, *List of Works in the New York Public Library Relating to Witchcraft in Europe*, appeared in the December 1911 issue of the same *Bulletin*. Both lists were subsequently issued as pamphlets.

Rhea White and Laura Dale's *Parapsychology: Sources of Information* (1973) is the best-annotated of all the bibliographies on parapsychology. It has such features as a list of locations where reviews of each book cited have appeared.

Marietta Chicorel's *Chicorel Index to Parapsychology and Occult Books* (1978) is a vast list of thousands of books in the field, some out of print and some not. It is not annotated and is organized in a rough way into general subject categories. Its main use, now that its in-print-or-not information is dated, would appear to be to check upon the accuracy or completeness of a bibliographical citation.

Malcolm South's *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Sourcebook* (1987) is an important and unique overview and guide to the literature on werewolves, unicorns, dragons, vampires, mermaids, and similar fanciful creatures.

An exceptionally good bibliography exists on mesmerism, hypnotism, and early (pre-1925) psychic-research literature. It is Adam Crabtree's *Animal Magnetism, Early Hypnotism and Psychical Research, 1766-1925: An Annotated Bibliography* (1988). The annotations are extensive and largely accurate.

The UFO literature is both extensive and largely ignorable by college and university reference collections. Exceptions are "The Condon Report" (*Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects*, by Edward U. Condon [1968]) and several of the UFO bibliographies and encyclopedias. The George Eberhart *UFOs and the Extraterrestrial Contact Movement* set (1986) has already been mentioned. There is a bibliography, *The UFO Literature* by R. Michael Rasmussen (1985), that is not as comprehensive as Eberhart's. There is also an older bibliography by Lynn E. Catoe, *UFOs and Related Subjects: An Annotated Bibliography* (1969). The UFO encyclopedias (all useful) include Margaret Sachs' *The UFO Encyclopedia* (1980), Ronald Story's *Encyclopedia of UFOs* (1980), and Alan Hendry's *UFO Handbook* (1979). A good new entry in this category is Jerome Clark's *UFOs in the 1980s* (1990; v. 1 of *The UFO Encyclopedia*). It is a useful recapitulation of UFOlogy in the 1980s in an encyclopedia format. Other volumes (yet to be published) will cover the pre-1980 period.

Other single-subject bibliographies that have some place in larger reference collections are Martin Riccardo's *Vampires Unearthed: The Complete Multi-Media Vampire and Dracula Bibliography* (1983), Margaret Carter's *The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography* (1989), and Michael Goss' *Poltergeists: An Annotated Bibliography of Works in English, Circa 1880-1975* (1979).

There are several occult dictionaries that do not pretend to be anything other than serious reference works. In other words, they are not intended to be occultists' handbooks. Among these are Harvey Day's *Occult Illustrated Dictionary* (1975), J. P. Chaplin's *Dictionary of the Occult and Paranormal* (1976), and Howard V. Chambers' *An Occult Dictionary for the Millions* (1966). A more specialized dictionary is Norman Blunsdon's *Popular Dictionary of Spiritualism* (1961). There is also a biographical dictionary of some value, *Biographical Dictionary of Parapsychology; With Directory and Glossary*, edited by Helene Pleasants (1964). Alan Gauld has produced a similar work, limited however to the earlier psychic researchers, in his *The Founders of Psychical Research* (1968).

A rather unusual type of book, which may well serve a reference function in a larger collection, is the popular, highly illustrated, multivolume set called an "encyclopedia" for lack of a better word. There are several of these in the occult field. The hesitation with calling them true encyclopedias comes from their vastly uneven quality. Some are no more than sensationalist, poorly researched compendiums, often without references and only a step or two above the weekly supermarket tabloids. Among the better of these sets is *Man, Myth and Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural*, edited by Richard Cavendish (1983, 24v.). There are also Cavendish's *The Unexplained*, Series 1 and 2, in eight volumes each (1983), and *Out of This World*, in twenty-four volumes, edited by Perrott Phillips (1976). The others are of lesser quality, and this includes the current series on the occult from *Time/Life Books* (1988-). This series has beautiful illustrations but is extremely credulous in what it accepts as fact, often repeating unchecked stories that have already been thoroughly discredited.

A new publication that fills a different gap in the literature is J. Gordon Melton's *New Age Encyclopedia* (1990), which is a worthy addition to a reference collection. It covers such diverse New Age topics as homeopathy, Esalen, the vegans, the Gaia hypothesis, and the Rosicrucians.

The two periodicals that I would recommend acquiring, although not in the reference collection, are *The Skeptical Inquirer* (Buffalo, New York) and *Fortean Times* (London). Although these come at the field from more or less opposite directions, they are uniformly careful and rational in their presentations, giving much to think about.

Having the above items (or most of them) in your reference collection will take care of the vast majority of questions involving the occult. The very largest collections might also want Benjamin Wolman's *Handbook of Parapsychology* (1977), *Parapsychology Abstracts International*, and editor Paul Kurtz' *The Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology* (1985) on hand in reference. Otherwise, the two books belong in the stacks of most large colleges and universities.

Although the occult does span many different fields, with a good reference collection on the occult many patrons' questions that would "fall through the cracks" of other reference sources can be answered. Such a collection makes interesting browsing for slow times on the reference desk as well.

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